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FOR NEA/ELA AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/14/2018
TAGS: PHUM KIRF CASC JO
SUBJECT: EVANGELICALS DISCUSS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

REF: A. AMMAN 802
 1B. AMMAN 612
 1C. AMMAN 104

Classified By: Ambasador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) The Ambassador met April 7 with two long-time American evangelical leaders whose residencies had been revoked and then reinstated over the preceding six months (ref A). Bob Robertson, a 33-year resident of Jordan and member of the Evangelical Free Church, and Charles Kohl, a nearly 20-year resident and Nazarene pastor, discussed with the Ambassador their surprise at the recent series of events (refs B & C), and concerns about the future of Christianity in the region.

12. (C) The Ambassador reiterated the U.S. commitment to the principles of international religious freedom and broadly recounted his attempts to engage the government to understand the importance the USG and the Embassy attach to these principles. The Ambassador also explained to Robertson and Kohl that their long experience as guests in Jordan was an important factor in the recent GOJ decision to reverse their residency denials and noted that their cases might be bellwethers for the GOJ in dealing with other foreign religious workers. Robertson and Kohl expressed appreciation for the Embassy's engagement on their behalf and surprise at the way the GOJ handled the issue. They described their efforts to use their well-connected Jordanian networks to understand their residency rejections and their surprise at finding the blame being cast on the traditional churches (ref B). Robertson and Kohl criticized certain outspoken individuals - former MP Awdeh Quwas for one - as taking advantage of the recent spat, but said they understood that the GOJ was behind their recent residency troubles.

13. (C) Both Robertson and Kohl reported that they had submitted their residence renewals to the Ministry of Interior. Robertson said that he spoke for three hours with a General Intelligence Directorate (GID) official on April 6 in a cordial meeting that Robertson recounted without any apprehension. He described the GID official's interest in his church's interactions with Muslims, asking questions about whether they give money to Muslims and how many former Muslims are in their community. Robertson observed growing religious conservatism in Jordanian society over the years, and suggested that it may also manifest itself in the government and security apparatus. Robertson was skeptical of GOJ claims that it was expelling evangelicals for their own safety, i.e., to prevent their becoming the target of extremists upset about proselytization, but acknowledged that some evangelicals were working too aggressively in truly marginal regions of Jordan where a backlash against their activities might be a legitimate concern. Kohl expected to receive a similar invitation for an interview with GID and promised to keep Emboffs apprised of any developments.

¶4. (C) When asked what they believed are the GOJ's redlines on evangelical and missionary activities, both acknowledged the existence of redlines, expressed a respect for the bounds of Jordanian society, and noted the ambiguity as to what is permitted and what is not. They said that some members of the evangelical community engage in activities that they personally would not - for instance, public recruiting or distributing religious materials, which Kohl and Robertson see as clearly on the other side of that line (and unnecessary in the age of the internet). They stressed that the GOJ needed to dissociate the activism of some missionary groups from those of ordinary churches. Robertson noted that many Jordanian Muslims routinely and aggressively open the topic of faith and promote the Quran and Islam to him, in response to which he would not hesitate to discuss his faith.

Kohl described how his church had recently baptized an Iraqi Muslim. He acknowledged that this was beyond GOJ redlines, but declared that he could not refuse to do so.

¶5. (C) Kohl and Robertson also described a series of deportations faced by Egyptian evangelical pastors and their fear that such deportations would continue. The Ambassador committed to active engagement with the GOJ in promulgating the principles of religious freedom, regardless of nationality. They expressed their appreciation, but wondered if Christians in the region were voting with their feet, repeating the refrain that the historic Christian community in the region is gradually emigrating to the West.

HALE